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SUBJECT: COSTA RICA'S ELECTION CAMPAIGN HITS ITS FINAL LEG

¶1. (SBU) Summary: With national elections a week away, Laura Chinchilla of the ruling National Liberation Party (PLN) is holding on to first place in the race to be Costa Rica's next president. Most observers believe she will win more than the required forty percent needed to win the election in the first round, and handily defeat her two primary challengers. Polls suggest that while PLN will retain a plurality within the Legislative Assembly, the body will become more fractionalized following the February 7 elections. In pre-election visits to important population centers, embassy teams found perceptions of rising crime, unemployment and growing voter apathy to be the primary concerns of voters. Post will send fifteen staff members to visit various polling places on election day. Regardless of the victor, we expect the GOCR to continue to be a constructive partner with the USG on our domestic and regional priorities. End Summary.

Laura Standing Firm

¶2. (SBU) A series of recent polls has shown Laura Chinchilla's support holding steady at 43-45 percent of the vote, only a week before national elections. Though she couldn't claim a clear victory in any of Costa Rica's three televised debates, the steady Chinchilla held her own and put in relatively mistake-free performances. With her steady polling numbers and the ruling National Liberation Party's (PLN) grassroots organization and ability to get out the vote, almost seventy percent of Costa Ricans expect Chinchilla to become Costa Rica's next president, according to a recent poll.

¶3. (SBU) Chinchilla's two main challengers, Otto Guevara from the Libertarian Movement (ML) and Otton Solis from the Citizens Action Party (PAC), have been unable to inflict damage on the frontrunner in recent weeks. Guevara had previously looked as if he might provide a true challenge to Chinchilla, and had been polling as high as thirty percent. However, Chinchilla, Solis and other candidates have recently focused on questioning Guevara's questionable sources of campaign funding and libertarian policy ideas (including an idea to "dollarize" the economy, which Solis ripped to shreds in a recent debate). The results have seen Guevara slipping a bit in the polls while Solis picks up some support, though not nearly enough to challenge Chinchilla.

Legislative Assembly

¶4. (SBU) The picture is a bit more muddled in the 57-seat Legislative Assembly, where Costa Rica uses a complicated mathematical formula to award Assembly seats to parties based on the number of votes received by province. The PLN should remain the plurality party and win around 23-25 seats, however unlike in years past there will be no single, large opposition party. The ML and PAC should make up the second and third largest parties, but with only around 13 and 8 seats respectively, with the near defunct Social Christian Union Party (PUSC) and other smaller parties splitting the remaining 11 seats.

¶5. (SBU) In all likelihood, the PLN will have to form partnerships with some of the minority parties to accomplish any real progress in the Assembly (a simple majority of 29 votes is needed for most votes, though some require a super-majority of 38). Political commentators have speculated that the centrist PUSC might serve as a natural partner in the Assembly, where the two parties have cooperated in the past. However PUSC presidential candidate Luis Fishman (currently polling at 8-9 percent), who is also a candidate for the Assembly, recently told us that while ideologically PUSC and PLN have much in common, PUSC has been punished by voters in the past for working together with the PLN. (NOTE: The parties are bitter rivals stemming from the Costa Rica's 1948 civil war, and many PUSC/PLN supporters have viewed past collaboration between their parties as an example of the corruption of their political elites. END NOTE.) That said, Fishman has made it clear both publicly and in private that he would favor a Chinchilla victory over that of Otto Guevara, and privately told us he would endorse Chinchilla in the event of a second round match-up between the two.

Run-off not likely, but...

¶6. (SBU) Though unlikely, if Chinchilla were to come in under the forty percent mark, she would face the second place vote-getter-in all probability Otto Guevara-in an April 4th run-off. Yet most political analysts believe that even in this case Chinchilla would win the run-off election, as at a base level Guevara is simply too conservative/libertarian for Costa Rica. Among other proposals, he would scale back or completely abolish the central bank after dollarizing the economy, eliminate federal funding of universities, and cut public spending on Costa Rica's health care system. Thus, the other candidates could hold their noses and lend their support to Chinchilla in the event of a run-off.

Election Reporting and Observing

¶7. (U) Throughout December and January post organized a series of nine visits of Mission personnel to various important population centers to meet with local leaders regarding their thoughts on the elections. Two-person teams met with local mayors, national assembly candidates, religious leaders, journalists, university professors and businessmen to find out what issues were most important to voters in their areas, and how they saw the elections playing out locally and nationally. The local leaders our teams met with consistently described ongoing perceptions of rising crime and worries over unemployment to be two of the primary voter concerns. Those we met with were also concerned with rising voter apathy despite what they saw as an increase in campaign spending in this year's election. Most of those we met with believed that Laura Chinchilla and the PLN would win the elections, though the ML and PAC had strong pockets of support in many of the areas we visited.

¶8. (U) The Embassy will be sending out fifteen staff members to

visit over thirty polling stations on election day. Though the OAS and a few other international missions are also sending out small observing teams, the bulk of monitors/observers will be from the major political parties and domestic non-governmental organizations.

Comment

¶9. (SBU) If Chinchilla, who served as President Oscar Arias' Vice President until declaring her candidacy in 2008, goes on to win the election it could provide continuity for GOCR programs. We expect her to continue to work with the USG to address security issues (and one of her campaign promises has been to increase spending on security), Costa Rica's environmental and energy challenges, and continued economic development, among other issues. The Georgetown University graduate and former USAID contractor has said that she hopes to continue to improve relations between the U.S. and Costa Rica, and has expressed particular interest in working with the Secretary on international women's issues. However, regardless of the victor of Sunday's elections, we expect the GOCR to continue to be a constructive partner with the USG on our domestic and regional priorities.

ANDREW